



## BROKEN CISTERNS

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 Jeremiah 2:1-13  
 Third Message  
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Webster's dictionary defines idolatry as "excessive devotion to or reverence for some person or thing." We all have idols that we worship. The things of this world become easy targets for the excessive devotion of our hearts and minds. God is often on the short end of our affections. The law says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod 20:3). The apostle John admonishes, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). Yet all too often we shrug off these commands and give ourselves over to idols.

But the prophet's poem from Jeremiah 2 penetrates the most callous heart, the most determined self-will. Listen to the word of the Lord. Jeremiah 2:1-13:

**Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,**

**"Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying,  
 Thus says the Lord,**

**"I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,**

**The love of your betrothals,  
 Your following after Me in the wilderness,  
 Through a land not sown.**

**"Israel was holy to the Lord,  
 The first of His harvest;  
 All who ate of it became guilty;  
 Evil came upon them," declares the Lord."**

**Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all  
 the families of the house of Israel.**

**Thus says the Lord,**

**"What injustice did your fathers find in Me,  
 That they went far from Me  
 And walked after emptiness and became empty?  
 "And they did not say, 'Where is the Lord  
 Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,  
 Who led us through the wilderness,  
 Through a land of deserts and of pits,  
 Through a land of drought and of deep darkness,  
 Through a land that no one crossed  
 And where no man dwelt?"**

**"And I brought you into the fruitful land,  
 To eat its fruit and its good things.  
 But you came and defiled My land,  
 And My inheritance you made an abomination.  
 "The priests did not say, 'Where is the Lord?'  
 And those who handle the law did not know Me;  
 The rulers also transgressed against Me,  
 And the prophets prophesied by Baal  
 And walked after things that did not profit.**

**"Therefore I will yet contend with you," declares  
 the Lord,**

**"And with your sons' sons I will contend.  
 "For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see,  
 And send to Kedar and observe closely,  
 And see if there has been such a thing as this!**

**"Has a nation changed gods,  
 When they were not gods?  
 But My people have changed their glory  
 For that which does not profit.**

**"Be appalled, O heavens, at this,  
 And shudder, be very desolate," declares the Lord.**

**"For My people have committed two evils:  
 They have forsaken Me, The fountain of living  
 waters,  
 To hew for themselves cisterns,  
 Broken cisterns,  
 That can hold no water." (Jer 2:1-13, NASB)**

We turn now from Jeremiah's call in chapter 1 to the prophet's early sermons, set out in chapters 2-20 of his book. The scholars say that these sermons were destroyed, but later they were dictated by Jeremiah to Baruch and spliced together by an editor.

God begins by using two metaphors to remind Israel of the wonderful love affair which they had shared together. Throughout the Old Testament, God uses the metaphor of marriage to describe his relationship with his people. Addressing Israel, he says that he remembers the "devotion of your youth" (literally, the *hesed* or loyal love of your youth), and the "love of your betrothals." Notice that from God's perspective, the honeymoon took place in the wilderness. There in the wilderness Israel depended on God and trusted him. There they followed, or literally, "walked," after him. When the cloud moved, whether by day or by night, the sons of Israel followed. When the cloud stopped, they made camp.

When two people are absorbed and infatuated with one another they seem utterly unaware of what is going on around them. They can't wait until they meet again. They can't seem to get enough of each other. Loss of sleep doesn't seem to bother them. They are always smiling. Not one thing about each other seems to bother them. That is how God remembers his early days with his bride Israel. They were very much in love.

The second metaphor is that of a harvest. God declares that Israel was the first fruit of his labor. According to the law, the first fruits were reserved for God

alone (Lev 19:23-24; Hos 9:10; Amos 6:1). The first fruits were holy, set apart for God's enjoyment. There would be other fruit from God's labors, other nations would become his people, but Israel was the first of the produce. Anyone who ate of those fruits fell under judgment. This is readily seen by what happened to Amelek (Deut 25:17-19), and Moab (Deut 23:3-6).

As Christians we can relate to this concept of young love. We remember our early Christian experience as a love affair with God. We recall our honeymoon with him. We had joy as never before. We couldn't get enough of God. But then things began to change. As happens in many marriages, the ardent love of youth grew cold. What happened to the joy of first love? What happened to Israel that caused her to forsake her first love?

Much of what follows in verses 4-13 resembles a courtroom drama as God brings charges against Israel. The word "contend" in verse 9 means to bring a legal lawsuit. Yahweh has been faithful, but Israel has been a fickle bride. The defendants are the "house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel" (verse 4). (How this squares with the fact that Israel, the northern tribes, had already been taken into captivity, is unclear.) The witnesses are heaven and earth (verse 12). All of creation is observing as God contends with his people.

God charges Israel with two crimes: they had forgotten the Lord, and they had walked after other idols. Firstly, Israel forgot God. Twice in the passage, in verses 6 and 8, God says that the people had not asked, "Where is the Lord?" They were not looking for God. They had forgotten God and forgotten the exodus. They had disregarded the memory that had shaped them, the journey from Egypt to Canaan. Notice the prominence of the word land in verses 6 and 7. God brought Israel out of Egypt through a land of deserts, pits, drought, darkness and isolation, into a fruitful land, literally, to Carmel. But Israel had defiled the land through worship of Baal. The Old Testament has much to say about land. Indeed, land is God's primal gift to his people. In the New Testament, this picture of the land is replaced by Christ. As Christians we defile Christ when we forget the Lord.

In verse 8, God charges the leaders and priests, the ones who handled the law, the rulers or shepherds and the prophets, with the same crime. They are not asking, "Where is the Lord?" Brueggemann comments, "priests no longer provide serious leadership. Judges forget their central commitment to justice. Rulers forget that power is a trust from Yahweh. Prophets forget that God has summoned them."<sup>1</sup> There was a breakdown of public life and a collapse of public institutions.

The second thing Israel did was walk after idols. Notice the three-fold use of the word walk in the text. In the beginning, Israel was following, walking after God in the wilderness (verse 2), but then they strayed far from him and walked after emptiness (verse 5), follow-

ing after things that did not profit (verse 8). Israel had been walking in God's footsteps, but they had walked away from him and stopped following him. "Far from me" is set in contrast to the intimate relationship of marriage. Infidelity had replaced fidelity. Other gods had replaced Yahweh and God became a wounded lover.

Israel walked after emptiness. This word means vapor, breath, worthlessness. This is the word vanity that is used so prominently in the book of Ecclesiastes. It means insubstantial, futility, weightlessness. And Israel walked after those things that did not profit, things that were of no benefit to anyone (verses 8, 11).

What had replaced God in Israel? If they had television back then, Israelites might have seen the following commercial running in the year 627 B.C.:

Special offer for one week only: Canaanite figurines. Now you can own your own idol. No longer will you have to make that long trek up the hill to offer sacrifices to Baal on the high places. You can now burn sacrifices in the comfort of your own backyard. Just in are the new 626 models of the bull and the beautiful Astarte, naked and alluring. These idols are guaranteed to increase crop production, protect from enemies, and ensure pregnancy. Results in 30 days or your money back. Credit approval given over the phone. No finance charges until the first of the year. All major credit cards accepted. You can order over the web, [www.baalworship.com](http://www.baalworship.com). Or just dial 1-800-666-BAAL. In Nebraska, you can call GO-BIG-RED.

Today, our idols are money, power, sex, success, achievement, pleasure, security. But they are just as useless and empty as the gods of old. We too forget God and pursue worthless things. But when we walk after emptiness, we become empty and hollow. Our lives lack substance and depth. We take on the character of and resemble the god we pursue. The object of our love determines the quality of our love and the quality of our character.

Philip Yancey writes: "Carl Jung (the well-known psychologist) reported that a third of his cases suffered from no definable neurosis other than 'the senselessness and emptiness of their lives.' He went on to name meaninglessness the general neurosis of the modern era."<sup>2</sup> Ted Turner, the media mogul, said, "Success is an empty bag. But you've got to get there to know it."

Alan Helms writes about what he learned from running and playing with the rich and famous in *Young Man from the Provinces*: "I learned a few things...I learned that being envied is the loneliest pleasure on earth, that self-absorption guarantees unhappiness, that the worst motive for action is groundless fear. And I wouldn't cross the street these days to meet someone who's merely celebrated or rich. I've seen so many of those people up close that I know how little such things count for in the effort to make a good life."<sup>3</sup> The title of the popular song of a few years ago, "Is that all there is?" puts it succinctly.

Are you empty? Do you feel like a hollow shell? Maybe it is because you have been walking after emptiness.

Forgetting God and walking after idols is illogical and absurd. And God expresses the absurdity of idolatry in at least three ways. Firstly, he asks, "What injustice did your fathers find in Me, that they went far from Me?" (verse 5). God inquires, "What did I do wrong?" He has loved them, protected them, guided them and provided for them. He has been a faithful husband and yet they have left him. He is incredulous at the thought.

God's second cry is that such a thing never occurred before in the history of the world. Kittim refers to the islands of Cyprus to the west, while Kedar lies to the east (verses 10-11). God is saying to Israel, in effect, go anywhere, as far as you can travel to the west or to the east and see if anything like this has ever happened before. No nation has ever traded gods. All of them have lesser gods, deities who are unreliable, totally worthless and useless, but no one exchanged even those gods. Yet Israel has exchanged the one true God for the gods of the Canaanites, gods that do not provide, protect or profit. Rome, Greece, Persia, no nation has ever changed its deities. Maybe this is what is wrong with our nation: we have exchanged gods. Paul picks up this imagery in Romans 1: "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom 1:22-23).

God's third cry of absurdity is the instruction that he gives to the heavens, "Be appalled, O heavens, at this, and shudder" (verse 12). "Shudder" means to make one's hair stands upright. God is shocked. He cannot understand what Israel has done. The thought is incredible to him. This has never happened before in history. That is why he tells all of creation to be in shock.

In Psalm 115 the psalmist makes the following comprehensive statement about just how worthless idols are:

**They have mouths, but they cannot speak;  
They have eyes, but they cannot see;  
They have ears, but they cannot hear;  
They have noses, but they cannot smell;  
They have hands, but they cannot feel;  
They have feet, but they cannot walk;  
They cannot make a sound with their throat.  
Those who make them will become like them,  
Everyone who trusts in them. (Psa 115:5-8)**

If idolatry is so stupid, illogical, absurd, empty and useless, why do we indulge in it? Why do we give ourselves to those things that cannot give to us anything in return? The powerful image in verse 13, one that is even more powerful than that which says we forget God and walk after idols, gets to the heart of the matter. The reason we walk after idols is because our souls are thirsty and we will pursue anything that holds out hope for quenching that thirst. The problem is that we drink from the wrong well. We insist on digging cisterns that cannot hold water, forsaking the living water that God provides.

Water is essential to life. We might abstain from food for a time, but we must drink water to survive. People who fast or go on hunger strike still must drink water. In recent years, bottled water has become very popular, as can be seen by the many people who carry around with them bottles of purified water. Everywhere people can be seen carrying their precious water. That is because water is critical to life.

The ancients dug cisterns, reservoirs, to store rainwater. In Israel today one can still see the remains of massive cisterns that were built centuries ago. In some places tunnels were dug from within city walls to a water source outside so that the residents could withstand an enemy siege. Now, imagine how frustrating it would be to dig a hole through the hard clay and rock only to discover that the cistern leaked. We know that no matter how well a cistern was constructed, it always leaked. "The best cisterns, even those in solid rock, are strangely liable to crack, ...and if by constant care they are made to hold, yet the water collected from clay roofs or from marly soil has the colour of weak soapsuds, the taste of the earth or the stable, is full of worms, and in the hour of greatest need it utterly fails."<sup>4</sup>

Now contrast a cistern, a leaking hole in the ground, with a source of living water, say, a mountain spring with cool, refreshing, pure water, readily available, with no need to dig to find it. That is what God had given his people--an endless supply of living water, yet Israel insisted on laboring to dig leaky cisterns to satisfy their thirst. We do the same. It is ridiculous, absurd and illogical, but we do it anyway. We forsake the intimacy of marriage and exchange the living God for idols that are useless and empty. We try to satisfy our soul-thirst with sex, money, power, career, possessions and excitement, but none of those things can love us, bless us or fill us.

Larry Crabb writes:

Digging leaky wells highlights our desire for immediate satisfaction on demand and on terms we can control. This is an immense problem. We experience soul-pain, a profoundly empty space that demands to be filled. We settle for lesser satisfactions than living water. We want pleasure that will fill us with joy. We dig wells when we are ruled by urges to feel good now. Whatever provides even a brief experience of ache-free happiness becomes irresistible. And we assume the responsibility to arrange for the pleasure we want. We dig our own wells. We don't like being at the mercy of an unpredictable God.<sup>5</sup>

We thirst, so we dig a hole. When we are not satisfied with that we dig another hole. We walk after emptiness and become empty ourselves. We stubbornly refuse what God wants to give us--the land of Carmel, a new Eden, living water--and try to satisfy ourselves by means of our own efforts. But our thirst is never quenched. Emily Dickinson said, "Success is only sweet to those who ne'er succeeded."

But all this emptiness, all this striving and working to quench our souls has a purpose: our thirst will lead us

to God. Only he can satisfy us. A time will come when we have to stop digging and put down our shovels. In John 4:10, Jesus told a woman who had a tortured past: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you. 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." Revelation 22:17 says, "And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."

In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Silver Chair*,<sup>6</sup> Jill is lost and thirsty in a strange land. She finds a brook, but she sees Aslan the Lion (a symbol of Jesus) lying beside the water. Aslan growls and tells her she may come and drink.

"May I ... could I ... would you mind going away while I drink?" said Jill.

The Lion answered with a look and a very low growl and as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

"Do you promise not to – do anything to me if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion.

It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

"I daren't come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh, dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion.

Amen.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 35.
2. Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 144.
3. Quoted by Henri Nouwen in *Sabbatical Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 62.
4. Quoted by Derek Kidner in *The Message of Jeremiah* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1987) 32.
5. Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word, 1997) 122-125.
6. Quoted by David Roper, *In Quietness and Confidence* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1999) 27.